

Special

— Call To Action Forum —

**Discurso di un mayor di Aruba
Stephany van der Biezen-Croes**

ORANJESTAD (AAN): Un di e personanan cu a hiba palabra na e foro di Call to Action na Nacionnan Uni, tabata e mayor Stephany van der Biezen-Croes. Un momento hopi special y historico, pa un Arubiano ta hiba palabra na e evento grandi aki, teni den sede di Nacionnan Uni na New York. Aki DIARIO ta presenta e discurso completo di Stephany van der Biezen-Croes cu el a duna na ingles:

"The moment I learned that my child was on the autism spectrum was both a revelation and a turning point. It brought a mix of emotions - concern, uncertainty, fear and doubt, but above all, it was a moment of profound love and acceptance.

As I embraced my child's unique neurodiversity, I embarked on a journey of understanding and advocacy that would shape my perspective in ways I never imagined.

This marked the beginning of a transformative and deeply meaningful chapter in my life. In the five years since becoming a mother to a child on the autism spectrum, my journey as a parent advocate has been defined by pride, joyful and painful moments.

I am dedicated to ensuring that my child and others like him are valued, accepted, and empowered to reach their full potential. I strive to foster a world where individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities are embraced, celebrated, and given the opportunity to thrive.

According to the WHO-UNICEF Global Report, stigmatization occurs when a community endorses prejudiced ideas, which typically manifest as negative emotional responses and devaluation. Children and adolescents with developmental disabilities are commonly considered to be "damaged" "dependent" and incapable of participation.

They encounter barriers to participation, as well as social, economic, educational and other forms of exclusion. Participation is a fundamental right and necessity to all children, including children with developmental disabilities.

Active participation empowers them to play a vital role in their own development and to positively contribute to society.

The lack of understanding and awareness among the general population makes it very difficult for children with developmental disabilities to experience crucial parts of living.

It deprives them of exploring their strengths, developing a sense of identity, developing skills, expressing creativity and experiencing enjoyment.

According to a national survey done by the Aruba Autism Foundation 94.7% of the participants reported not knowing how to interact with autistic individuals. As a mother this is concerning because this can con-

tribute to social isolation.

Feeling excluded from social interactions can have a profound impact on an individual's mental health and sense of belonging.

This can also lead to limited opportunities for friendship and social learning and perpetuate barriers to inclusive education and community integration.

Peers who lack awareness or empathy may be more likely to engage teasing, exclusion or other forms of bullying behavior towards our neurodivergent individuals.

Another aspect of participation that awakens deep fears about the future is the educational inequalities that children with developmental disabilities face.

As parents, we worry about whether they will receive the education and support they need to reach their full potential, pursue their goals, and

lead fulfilling lives.

I am already faced with questions about whether I will send my son to a "special school" even though he has not shown a need to go to a special school.

The global report states the importance of having inclusive educational systems that, rather than segregate students, provide students with developmental disabilities with the necessary assistance in their classroom. I have heard countless horror stories of how the absence of comprehension and systematic support within educational systems has led to verbal and physical abuse against children with developmental disabilities.

I can recount numerous examples, but I will share two particularly troubling incidents. We understand that children with autism may encounter challenges with speech, and that speech regression is not uncommon.

Despite this, a teacher once forced a child to stand with their backpack all day simply because they would not say good morning. Is such treatment acceptable? In another school, there have been multiple reports of children being physically restrained, even sat on, during meltdowns.

The UN Convention on rights of Persons with Disabilities commits state parties to ensure inclusive education systems, and we must comply with this commitment sooner rather than later so stories like I just mentioned do not have to repeat themselves.

I will continue to fight tirelessly for their rights, acceptance, and inclusion in a world that too often fails to see their worth. World autism month is about sharing our unique perspectives and standing together as a community to make a difference.

For the sake of our children, I am demanding change!

Let's all stand together and advocate for more services and support for those who need it.

Thank you.

